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T. Wing Lo

DOI: 10.1177/0020872805053469

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://isw.sagepub.com/content/48/4/455
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Task-centered practice

Task-centered casework was developed by Reid and Epstein (1972) in the 1970s to handle problems that were related to inadequate resources, role performance, social transition, interpersonal conflict, dissatisfaction in social relations and relations with formal organizations (Reid, 1978, 1992, 1997). Garvin (1974, 1985) further applied it to groupwork practice. Since then, task-centered practice has been applied to groups in a wide variety of social service settings, such as child-care residential homes (Pazaratz, 2000), and in handling different kinds of personal problems, like sibling violence (Reid and Donovan, 1990) and maternal depression (Woodcock, 1995). Social workers have used task-centered groupwork to help different clienteles, such as youth at risk (Kinnevy et al., 1999), family members of people with AIDS (Pomeroy et al., 1995), the chronically mentally ill (Garvin, 1992) and members of new stepfamilies (Bielenberg, 1991). In Hong Kong, however, the application of task-centered groupwork is relatively new. This article summarizes the practical experience of transferring task-centered casework to groupwork in Hong Kong. It focuses on discussing operational aspects rather than outcomes.

T. Wing Lo is Associate Professor in the Department of Applied Social Studies, City University of Hong Kong. Address: Department of Applied Social Studies, City University of Hong Kong, Yau Yat Chuen, Kowloon, Hong Kong. [email: sstwl@cityu.edu.hk]
Task-centered groupwork in Hong Kong

In Hong Kong, groupwork during the 1990s was dominated by social groups, rather than remedial or therapeutic groups, that were organized in community and youth centers. Social groups were classified as socialization groups, social service groups, interest or skill learning groups and social concern groups. They aimed at fostering human relations, volunteerism, leadership, community participation and social consciousness (Hong Kong Council of Social Service, 1991; Lo et al., 1997). The social groups usually had unspecified group duration, an open membership system and a revolving cycle of leadership (Lam, 1997), and their activities were criticized as being piecemeal and inflexible in meeting group members’ needs (Hon et al., 1997). Thus, task-centered groupwork was introduced by the author to a welfare organization in 1997. It ran 16 eight-session task-centered groups for 192 single male and female working people who had exhibited problems in dating (dating groups). In 2000 and 2001, the author also ran nine 12-session task-centered groups for 79 part-time evening university students who faced stress and anxiety during their study (stress groups). The group objective was to help members set treatment goals and implement tasks to solve their problems under the pressure of having to find a solution within a limited time span. Overall, the groups went through the following phases of development.

1. Pre-group phase

This phase served the purpose of matching and selecting members. The group worker explained to members the goals and principles of task-centered group practice. It was made clear to them that the group’s foremost priority was to solve their personal problems, and the second priority was to assist other members to solve those problems. The worker highlighted the short-term nature of the group to help the members understand the importance of active participation within a limited time span. This put pressure on members to maximize their learning opportunities. Due to the unique group nature, workers in the dating groups conducted pre-group interviews to screen out unsuitable clients who might be better served by means of casework. These included ‘professional members’ who often shopped around community centers for dating targets rather than to learn proper social skills, and ‘frequent failures’ who had not benefited from previous counseling groups. This phase was important because, unlike task-centered casework, task-centered
groupwork requires the homogeneity of members’ problems and readiness. To limit the group size to a controllable level was also desirable.

2. Group formation
As disclosing personal problems to strangers is taboo in Chinese culture, the first two meetings aimed to develop intimate and trustful relationships among group members. Moreover, group norms were set to guide appropriate behavior regarding mutual aid, confidentiality and regular attendance. Being aware of the members’ need for security and trust, the worker gave them freedom and space to get familiar with each other through structured group exercises and warm-up games. For instance, a ‘blind walk’ was used to establish trust among members. In the ‘sedan-chair’ game, the whole group was divided into two or three subgroups to compete in a sedan-chair race. Each subgroup made a human chair to carry a member to a designated place. The fun, care and co-operation that were generated by the game fostered members’ rapport. In the ‘self-portrait’ game, members were encouraged to use anything that they thought of to portray themselves. Impressed by each other’s creativity, members became eager to understand the person drawing’s psychological constructs, listened attentively in sharing and involved themselves in discussion. As one member said after the games, ‘Although in the first meeting we did not disclose ourselves fully, the group made me feel warm, friendly, and trustful’ (Member Wong). This rapport facilitated the smooth running of the training and treatment that followed. The use of warm-up games is unique to task-centered groups, and they require more time than task-centered casework to engage clients in problem solving.

3. Problem identification, goal setting and task selection
After rapport was established, members were more at ease in expressing themselves. The third and fourth meetings focused on identifying problems and setting goals and tasks. To facilitate their disclosure of problems, the ‘magic shop’ game was introduced. The group was divided into two subgroups, one being shopkeepers and the other buyers. Instead of using money, buyers were asked to use their own ‘weaknesses’ to buy from the shopkeepers some ‘strengths’ that they wanted. As one member disclosed, ‘In the process, I discovered that I seldom explored what kind of person I had been, and I rarely thought about my personal goal. Although the game was short, I could self-reflect on my own weaknesses and
further understand myself’ (Member Chong). After the game, the worker encouraged members to share why they traded certain weaknesses for strengths, so that the group had a more accurate understanding of each other’s initial problems. In general, members of the dating groups did not know how to develop a relationship with a man or woman whom they liked. They lacked topics for mutual sharing in dating. They did not understand the interests of, or lacked the necessary social skills in relating to, the opposite sex. Lack of confidence in facing or talking to a man or woman whom they wanted to date was also common. In the stress groups, the members were facing up to the stress and anxiety that arose from the conflicting commitments and demands between daytime work, family responsibilities, health problems, job security and examination pressures.

A positive effect of task-centered groupwork, which cannot be found in task-centered casework, was the universalization of personal problems. The review of members’ problems in the group made them understand that they were not alone and isolated. As one member disclosed, ‘Although the methods other members suggested did not suit me, the mutual sharing made me understand that they also faced the same pressure; some situations were even worse than mine. As we were in the same boat, we had a heartfelt understanding of each other’s suffering’ (Member Ko). Another member noted: ‘I knew I was not the only person with problems. I felt better because everyone had their own problems . . . I felt warmth in the group as other members would support me’ (Member Cheung). Thus, the universalization of problems helped reduce members’ feelings of failure. Coupled with sufficient and timely empathy from the group, a climate of mutual aid and concern emerged.

Similar to task-centered casework, some members were frustrated or obsessed with their problems, and thus could not convey the core issues concisely. The worker helped them to clarify their views and issues. In a stress group, a newly wed husband shared the problem with his wife. She questioned him about why he had married her, confronted him with her feeling that he had not fulfilled a husband’s duty and aired her suspicion that he did not love her anymore. When he kept on mumbling, the worker helped him clarify and compartmentalize his problem, as seen in this extract.

W: ‘What is your expectation of the relationship with your wife?’
M: ‘I hope our relationship will be better.’
W: ‘How better?’
M: ‘By trying to avoid quarrelling again.’
W: ‘Under what circumstances did you quarrel before?’
M: ‘When she was at home and I did my own work, she would be angry.’
W: ‘Then, what can you do to solve this problem?’
M: ‘When she is at home, I will not do my own work.’ (Worker Wong)

After the member’s problem was concretized, the worker eventually engaged him in setting three tasks: first, not to do his work while his wife was at home; second, to tell his wife of this plan, and third, to read a book on husband–wife communication.

After problems had been identified, group members were guided to develop goals and tasks to be achieved and estimate the amount of time and effort to be committed. At this stage, the worker paid attention to their motivation and readiness for goal setting. Very often members set inappropriate goals that were either too ambitious (e.g. having a movie star as a girl friend) or not challenging enough (e.g. waiting for a woman to date him). The worker confronted these unrealistic goals and helped members to consider the feasibility according to their capacity and social reality (Garvin, 1992). With such guidance, members developed or made changes to their tasks. For instance, a member of a dating group set himself the task of learning to initiate dialogue with females. The worker then helped him to concretize the task so that he would talk to two female members for five minutes in each group session. Thus, similar to task-centered casework, the members of the task-centered groups were allowed to start with small steps and complete their tasks progressively, without selecting prolonged, large and obscure tasks (Macy-Lewis, 1985).

Overall, the process of problem identification, goal setting and task selection in task-centered groups was similar to that of task-centered casework. Yet there was one significant difference: group participation was highly encouraged at this stage. The worker invited members to give feedback to each other. The mutual exchange increased their choice of tasks. Even if members eventually failed to solve their own problems, they would achieve personal growth and satisfaction through helping other members. Nonetheless, the worker had to be alert to the negative outcomes of group enthusiasm: ‘In other members’ eyes, the task was simple but she failed to complete it many times. She offered various excuses in
every meeting. Cognitively she understood she should solve the problem but she lacked the determination, and she tried to justify it with external factors. During the design of tasks, the group ignored her situations. . . . The assessment of her ability was not thorough’ (Worker Kam).

Similar to the principle of task-centered casework, the crux of the intervention was that the goals which were set by members had to be the individuals’ goals rather than the group’s goals. The members would be more committed to achieving their goals when they were the decision makers. In this respect, both task-centered casework and groupwork share the same direction.

4. Contracting

After the selection of tasks, the worker helped members to formulate a contract. In task-centered casework, a contract should include the prioritization of target problems, goals, tasks, the duration of intervention sequences and details of group sessions (Reid, 1978, 1997). However, in our task-centered groups, the group’s involvement was stressed. Members put down the problems that they defined and the tasks that they proposed on a piece of paper which they invited other members to sign and give feedback on. This clarified and validated the proposed plan. To make individual contracts more meaningful to members, some workers turned them into a group contract by going through rituals such as palm printing and mutual blessing. Although the contracts were brief, they had special meanings for members:

In last week’s group session, we set our tasks. Each of us noted the tasks on a piece of paper and let other members put down their encouragement on it. My task was to complete an essay (which had been delayed) on Saturday. I stuck the contract to the mirror of my bathroom so that I could see it every day. Most importantly, by doing so I would not forget the silent support of fellow members. Because of this determination, I chose an effective and appropriate way to complete the task: I got up early in the morning, exercised for an hour, and had a big breakfast. I sat in front of my desk from 8:30 a.m. to 2:00 p.m., and eventually completed the essay. No excuse, no give up. I could hardly describe the sense of achievement and satisfaction in words. (Member Ko)

5. Task implementation and review

Some contracts guided members to finish their tasks, but some could not. Unlike the contracts of task-centered casework, the contracts that were made in task-centered groupwork imposed tremendous pressure on members when they failed to meet the group’s expecta-
tions. From the fifth session onwards, members reported what they had accomplished so far and shared their experiences and problems with the group. Sometimes the reporting process was not at all easy:

My task was to complete a report within a week . . . but I had not taken any action. When the group session was near, I felt the pressure, worrying that someone would ask me. When the session began, I became even more worried. I tried to keep myself quiet, hoping that nobody would be interested in my progress. When the worker asked me and I replied in the negative with embarrassment, everyone was staring at me, listening carefully to every word I said. Immediately the whole group burst out with questions, trying to identify my obstacles. At first, I tried my best to tell them . . . but they were not satisfied with my explanations and kept asking. At that moment, I felt very confused and pressurized. My defense mechanism was turned on. I really wanted to escape from their questions as quickly as possible. I really wanted to quiet down to reorganize my thought . . . In the end, I admitted to them that what they said was correct so that the discussion could stop immediately. Suddenly an idea flashed in my mind: I should have been absent from this meeting. (Member Kwan)

Such negative experience might force some members to drop out of the group. However, the same negative experience would be positive if clients could turn it into something constructive. There were occasions when group pressure did motivate clients to continue their tasks. For instance, the same member continued her reflection: ‘On the way home, the heated discussion still hung over me. I felt upset but simultaneously I had a strong motivation to complete the task in the week. In the following days, I always thought about my task and tried to squeeze time to finish it. Eventually I did it and I felt relieved and relaxed’ (Member Kwan).

Whether members dropped out of a group to escape from group pressure depended on their attachment and loyalty to the group. One member reflected: ‘I did feel the group pressure, but I had the power to keep my promise [to fulfill the task] because I valued my group’ (Member Li). Another member added, ‘when I could not accomplish my task, I felt ashamed because I let my members down . . . In order not to disappoint them again, I decided to complete it’ (Member Lee). Belonging to the group and the attachment of members, if successfully built up, made task-centered groupwork more appealing than casework in terms of providing effective treatment.

Moreover, members who had completed their tasks could become role models (Woodcock, 1995), whereas those who had encountered difficulties were consoled and supported, especially by those with similar experiences. Useful suggestions from members were conveyed
to the failures. For instance, a male member found himself always ‘out of a topic’ when he was alone with females, and was thus unable to complete the task of talking to females. Other male members who had faced similar difficulties shared with him the skills that they used in ice breaking, while female members gave him examples of interesting topics. The involvement of failures in sharpening their skills through role playing was helpful for them to rehearse and test reality. Members were then encouraged to make a commitment to the tasks again and report their progress in the next session. Under this group spirit, the members of task-centered groups became more involved in problem solving and more willing to help each other than in task-centered casework. Moreover, as the group required more time to review every member’s progress, this phase was significantly longer than that in task-centered casework.

6. Evaluation and termination
In the last one or two meetings, the worker guided members to review the task-centered group process again, with the objective of helping them to develop insights from their own problem-solving experiences and to reveal what they had achieved (Caspi and Reid, 1998). One evaluation game was to ask members to write down what they had gained and disposed of after the group treatment, and share it with the group. Favorable feedback was obtained, such as ‘I got insight and courage and I lost selfishness’; ‘I learned new ways to view my problem and I lost unhappiness’; and ‘I obtained friendship and direction, and I lost shame and prejudice’. The worker reinforced the members’ achievements and showed appreciation of their initiatives and efforts. Through summarization, reflection and modeling, members gained confidence and skills in using a task-centered approach to solve other problems of living in the future. In fact, some active members had already applied the skills and knowledge that they learned to their daily life and reported their experiences to the group. When the group was terminated but some members were still troubled by unsolved problems, the worker followed them up with casework. For instance, an underweight female member was upset and puzzled by a comment that men did not like women who were too thin. Another woman was troubled by a serious relationship problem with her boss. After the group, they sought individual guidance from the worker.
Conclusion: the transferability of task-centered casework to groupwork

The transferability of task-centered casework to groupwork is nothing new in the West (Fortune, 1985; Garvin, 1985; Pomeroy et al., 1995; Woodcock, 1995), but in Hong Kong the attempt is quite new. Our experiences above suggest that the task-centered approach can be applied to adult mutual-aid groups, although with modifications. The application of task-centered groupwork, with the benefits of the universalization of problems, spectator therapy and reality testing, produced mutual sharing and group support. Through the worker’s guidance and the group’s feedback, members were able to understand the situations and problems that they were facing, and analyze how effectively they had performed in solving their problems.

Task-centered casework has a shorter duration of intervention, but our comparison of the eight-session dating groups and the 12-session stress groups concludes that the limited time span of the dating groups was undesirable for group intervention (Hon et al., 1997). Members had their own stories and it took the group a long time to tell their stories and receive members’ feedback. To handle members’ problems in the groups, more sessions, such as 12, were necessary. This observation echoes the view of Pomeroy et al. (1995: 150) that eight group sessions ‘may not have been enough for participants to feel that other members were part of their social support system’. Compared with casework, task-centered groupwork requires far more sessions for members’ deliberation and exchange, especially when social skills training or assertiveness training is to be provided. Thus, our experience supports Woodcock’s (1995: 82) contention that ‘although it may remain possible for task-centered methods to be time-limited, involvement may be longer than the brief time-limited work envisaged by Reid’. In conclusion, to solve the inherited time-limited problems of task-centered casework, the following skills must be emphasized.

1. The clear conveyance of the objectives and principles of task-centered groupwork to members before the group begins, to ensure the readiness of members.
2. The selection of members with homogeneous, though not necessarily identical, problems.
3. The maintenance of group size to a controllable level, preferably of not more than eight members, to enhance effective participation and mutual sharing.
4. The use of at least 12 sessions to allow sufficient time and space for group discussion and sharing.
5. The use of effective warm-up games to foster members’ rapport and speed up the group’s development.
6. The use of group exercises to facilitate members’ exploration of initial problems.
7. The development of the feeling that ‘we are in the same boat’.
8. The encouragement of members to identify, clarify and handle their own problems, and simultaneously mobilize them to support each other.
9. Assistance for members to set specific tasks with the group’s advice and start with small steps.
10. The ability not to let collective ideas blur individual members’ needs and goals.
11. The ability to turn individual contracts into a meaningful group contract by going through certain rituals.
12. The ability to help members to review uncompleted tasks, identify obstacles and consequences, search for solutions and re-do the tasks with the group’s encouragement.
13. Awareness of the group pressure that is placed on the failures and the ability to intervene accordingly.
14. The ability to equip members with the necessary problem-solving skills through group exercises and role playing if appropriate.
15. The reinforcement of members’ achievements and following up those who need individual guidance.

Hong Kong is a fast-moving society and its people prefer fast-food type social services. As such, time-limited, task-centered group-work can be attractive. What is most appealing about this group approach is that it helps members to set clear and concrete goals to be achieved within a short period. Specific and easy-to-handle tasks provide clear directions for members to improve their life skills and solve their problems. The tasks serve as effective yardsticks to evaluate progress. Positive group pressure induces members to set, attempt and complete their tasks as efficiently as they can. The group exchange allows them to work out solutions together, and to experience not only their own but also other members’ successes and failures. Thus, group learning enhances each individual’s problem-solving abilities.
References


